



Did Christopher Columbus's Voyages Have a Positive Effect on World History?

YES: Robert Royal, from "Columbus and the Beginning of the New World," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (May 1999)

NO: Gerald Vizenor, from "Christopher Columbus: Lost Havens in the Ruins of Representation," *The American Indian Quarterly* (Fall 1992)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Robert Royal states although there were negatives that emanated from Columbus's New World discoveries, they continue to "remind us of the glorious and ultimately providential destiny on the ongoing global journey that began in the fifteenth century."

NO: Writer Gerald Vizenor uses an evaluation of sources on the Columbus discoveries to argue that they had a deleterious effect on the world that Columbus had discovered.

In October, 1998, a *New York Times* article covered a dispute between Hispanic-Americans and Italian-Americans with regard to which ethnic group should play the more important role in the organization of New York's Columbus Day Parade. While both groups had legitimate claims to the Columbus legacy (after all, Columbus was a Genoese Italian, but he did his most important work for the Spanish nation), the dispute must have drawn an ironic response from those who witnessed the revisionist bashing that the "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" had received in recent years.

In the five centuries since "Columbus sailed the ocean blue," his historical reputation and the significance of his accomplishments have undergone a series of metamorphoses. In the distant past, an eclectic collection of Columbus critics would number essayist Michel Montaigne, English writer Samuel Johnson, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and French historian and philosopher Abbe Guillaume Reynal, some of whom believed that the world would have been better off without the admiral's discoveries.

It has only been in the last two centuries that Columbus's stock has risen in the theater of public opinion and historical significance. There were many reasons for this change including: (1) the United States acting as a model for democratic government in a 19th/20th-century world living under monarchical/autocratic rule; (2) the part played by the U.S. in the Allied victory during World War I, which ended the German, Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires and brought a greater level of democracy to many parts of Europe; (3) the role assumed by the U.S. in saving Europe and the world from the specter of fascist militarism during World War II. All affected the reversal of Columbus's historical fortunes, as many wondered what the world would have become if the U.S. had not been there to provide inspiration and assistance in these times of need. Thus, some of the credit our nation accrued was passed on to Columbus, whose work had made our nation possible. Samuel Eliot Morison's 1940 book, *ADMIRAL OF THE OCEAN SEA*, marked the climax of this laudatory view of Columbus and his accomplishments.

Historians and publishers love anniversaries and the publicity they generate, and, next to a millennial celebration, none may be more significant than a quincentennial one. Thus, on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage, the requisite number of tomes on Columbus and his accomplishments were made ready for an eager market. But the world of 1992 was different than the world of Morison's "Admiral of the Ocean Sea," and the historical profession had changed along with it.

The end-of-the-millennium generation of historians treated Columbus differently than had their immediate predecessors. Operating from a different world view, Columbus became to many of them a flawed figure responsible for the horrors of the trans-atlantic slave trade, the annihilation of Native American civilizations through cruelty and disease, and the ecological destruction of a continental paradise.

The recently published books about Christopher Columbus opened a national dialogue on the subject. A national Columbus exhibition in Washington, D.C. was received with skepticism by some and quiet reverence by others. While some participated in the national Columbus Day celebration on October 12, 1992, others declared it a day of mourning in honor of those who lost their lives as a result of Columbus's enterprises. A cultural hornet's nest was unleashed, and any who entered into the Columbus fray had to have the thickest of skin.

Fortunately, as is usually the case, time has a soothing effect, and we will have to wait until the year 2092 for the next major Columbus debate. For now, we have the opportunity—with cooler heads and calmer temperaments—to examine the Columbus legacy.

In this Issue, Robert Royal stresses the positive elements that came from Columbus's discoveries. Gerald Vizenor counters by emphasizing the negative elements which stemmed from the same discoveries, especially the impact they had on the New World and its peoples.

Robert Royal



Columbus and the Beginning of the World

... **T**he world we know began in the fifteenth century. Not the world of course in the sense of human life or human civilizations, which had already existed for millennia, but the world as a concrete reality in which all parts of the globe had come into contact with one another and begun to recognize themselves as part of a single human race—a process still underway. The spherical globe we had known about since the classical world; in the Middle Ages, readers of Dante took it for granted. Yet it was only because of a small expedition by a few men driven by a mishmash of personal ambition, religious motives, and the desire for profit that an old mathematical calculation was turned into a new human fact. Or as a historian sixty years later accurately characterized the discovery of the New World, it was “the greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it).”

In our own confused way, we continue to pay homage to that achievement. In 1999, NASA will put a satellite into an orbit a little less than a million miles out into space in what is called L-1, the libration point where the gravity of the earth and the sun exactly balance one another. Equipped with a telescopic lens and video camera, it will provide a twenty-four-hour-a-day image of the surface of the earth. Not surprisingly, one of the enthusiasts behind the project is Al Gore, probably the most environmentally agitated public figure alive. But in spite of the damage that Gore and many others believe we humans have inflicted on the planet since our first large steps in exploring it, and despite the laments of multiculturalists about Europe’s rise to world dominance, the new satellite will be called Triana, after Rodrigo de Triana, who first spotted lights on land from the deck of the *Pinta* during the first voyage of Columbus.

Perhaps the name is only a bow to growing Hispanic influence in the United States; perhaps it hints that we would like to think of ourselves as equally on the verge of another great age of discovery. But whatever our sense of the future, the Columbus discoveries and the European intellectual and religious developments that lay behind them are today at best taken for granted, at worst viewed as the beginning of a sinister Western hegemony over

man and nature. The last five centuries, of course, offer the usual human spectacle of great glories mixed with grim atrocities. But we cannot evaluate the voyages of discovery properly—much less the fifteenth-century culture from which they sprang—without gratitude for what they achieved or understanding of their human dimensions. In the fifteenth century, the discoveries were rightly regarded as close to a miracle, especially given the way the century had begun.

The early 1400s were marked by profound religious, political, economic, and even environmental turmoil. At one point in the first decade of the century, there were simultaneously three claimants to the papal throne and three to the crown of the Holy Roman Empire. And the large-scale institutional crises were only a small part of the story. Europe was still suffering from the devastation wrought at the height of the Black Death over half a century earlier and in smaller waves thereafter. Overall, something like 40 percent of the population disappeared in the mid-fourteenth century, in some regions even more. Land lay fallow for lack of workers, villages were deserted, poverty spread. As many modern environmentalists have devoutly wished, nature took its vengeance as human population decreased. Wolves multiplied and returned, even appearing in capital cities. Human predators—in the form of brigands—made travel unsafe over wide areas. The consequences of the retreat of civilization spurred Henry V, fabled victor of Agincourt, to offer rewards for the elimination of both types of pests. Though the beauty of landscapes emerged as never before in contemporary painting and literature, it was not a century that indulged itself in easy sentimentality about the goodness of unimproved nature, human or otherwise. On the contrary, natural hardships spurred the fifteenth century to nearly unparalleled achievements.

But if the internal situation were not enough, Europe was also being squeezed by forces from outside. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks finally succeeded in taking Byzantium. Turkish troops had already been fighting as far into the Balkans as Belgrade a few years earlier. Otranto, in the heel of Italy, fell to them in 1480 for a time. We might have expected the Christian powers to lay aside rivalries momentarily and defend themselves from an alien culture and religion. But the main Atlantic nation-states—England, France, and Spain—were still only beginning to take shape. The rest of Western Europe was broken, despite the theoretical claims of the emperor, into a crazy quilt of competing small powers. So no coordinated effort occurred, though Plus II and other popes called for a crusade. Plus even wrote to Sultan Muhammad II, conqueror of Constantinople, inviting him to convert to Christianity. Whether this letter was intended seriously or as a mere pretext for further action, it failed. Neither “European” nor “Christian” interests were sufficiently united to galvanize the effort. The Pope died in 1464 at the eastern Italian port of Ancona waiting for his people to rally behind him.

A crusade to retake the Holy Land was sometimes a mere pipe dream, sometimes a serious proposal during the course of the century. Ferdinand of Spain listened frequently to such plans, but refrained from doing much. (Machiavelli praises him in *The Prince* as one of those rulers who shrewdly take pains to appear good without necessarily being so.) Charles VIII of

France invaded Italy in 1494 but also had in mind an attempt to retake Constantinople and restore the Eastern Christian Empire. Earlier, Henry V, on his way to Agincourt, proclaimed his intentions not only to assume the French throne but to "build again the walls of Jerusalem." Western Europe had a persistent if vague sense of responsibility to defend Christianity from Islamic military threats and a deeper need to recover the parts of Christendom lost to Muslim conquest, even if the good intentions were thwarted by intra-European distractions.

Had Islam continued its advance, much of Europe might have then resembled the cultures we now associate with the Middle East. The Americas might have been largely Muslim countries as opposed to largely Christian ones. Islam was more advanced than Europe in 1492, but in the paradoxical ways of culture, its very superiority contributed to its being surpassed. Muslims do not seem to have taken much interest in Western technical developments in navigation, and even well-placed countries like Morocco were never moved to brave the high seas in search of new lands. European technological innovation and military advance may have been born of necessity, given the superiority of outside cultures and the conflicts and rivalries among European nations.

This reminds us of something often overlooked in most contemporary historical surveys. The "Eurocentric" forces, of which we now hear so much criticism, were actually something quite different in the fifteenth century. What we today call "Europeans" thought of themselves as part of Christendom, and a Christendom, as we shall see, that desperately needed to return to some of its founding truths. Similarly, they did not regard themselves as the bearers of the highest culture. Ancient Greece and Rome, they knew, had lived at a higher level, which is why the Renaissance felt the need to recover and imitate classical models. The fabled wealth of the distant Orient and the clearly superior civilization of nearby Islam did not allow Christendom to think itself culturally advanced or, more significantly, to turn in on itself, as self-satisfied empires of the time such as China did. Contemporary European maps—the ones all the early mariners consulted in the Age of Discovery—bear witness to their central belief: Jerusalem, not Europe, was the center of the world.

But this very sense of threat and inferiority, combined with the unsettled social diversity of Europe at the time, gave Europeans a rich and dynamic restlessness. Not surprisingly, the rise towards a renewed Europe began in the places least affected by the population implosion and, therefore, more prosperous: what we today call the Low Countries and, above all, Northern Italy. Renaissance, as Erwin Panofsky demonstrated a few decades ago, had been occurring in Europe since the twelfth century. But the one that took place in Northern Italy in the fifteenth century—the one we call the Renaissance—produced multiple and wide-ranging consequences.

Pius II was in many ways emblematic of the mid-century. A cultivated humanist born in Siena in 1405 with the imposing name Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, he initially came under the spell of St. Bernardino, who preached a strictly observant reformed Franciscan life (of which more anon). But he shortly became attracted to the exciting life of the Renaissance Italian humanists, which is to say libertinism and literary pursuits. He shifted parties among

papal contenders, pursuing his own ambitions for many years, wrote a popular history (*Historia rerum ubique gestarum*) that gathered together wide-ranging facts and fictions about foreign lands, and even became imperial poet and secretary to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. But compared with the squabbling popes and anti-popes who preceded him and the colorful escapades of the Borgias, Pius had his virtues. He was learned and hard-working, enjoyed nature, sought reform, and could have made a difference in Europe had his office enjoyed the respect it once had and was to have again later. The religious renaissance, however, like the cultural, scientific, and artistic one with which we are more familiar, had to come from other sources.

Renaissance achievements found multiple and overlapping uses in a Europe in ferment. The geometry developed by the Florentine Paolo Toscanelli allowed Fillippo Brunelleschi, over the objections of a commission of Florentine experts, to dare construction of the unsupported dome that crowns the magnificent Florentine Duomo. Just a few decades later, an intellectually curious Genoese mariner corresponded with Toscanelli in preparation for his attempts to convince another panel of experts in Spain that it was possible to sail west to the Indies (no serious thinker at the time, by the way, believed the earth was flat). His figures were wrong; the distance was greater than he claimed. The experts—and perhaps Columbus himself—knew it. But it was an age when for various reasons people had the faith to attempt things beyond what was previously thought possible. It is worth looking closely at some of those reasons.

Much has recently been written, for example, claiming that the Christian dimension of Columbus' personality was merely a cover for greed and ambition. These alleged traits are then read as a metaphor for a hypocritical European expansion under the cover of religion. Hypocrites certainly existed in the fifteenth century, as they do today. But real history—as opposed to anachronistic morality tales—is always more complex than the simple motives we project back onto figures quite different from ourselves. Like the Italian humanists, who are often wrongly portrayed as modern unbelieving intellectuals, Columbus combined his faith with new knowledge and new interests. But that did not make his faith any less real. He wanted that Renaissance ideal, glory: in this case, that of an unprecedented voyage. He drove hard bargains with Ferdinand and Isabella to secure the financial benefits of his discoveries for himself and his descendants. (The Muslim conquests and consequent monopolies over Eastern trade routes made the European search for alternate routes all the more necessary and profitable.) Yet when all the mundane reasons have been listed, the spiritual dimension of the project remains in ways that are quite unexpected.

In the preface to his *Libro de las profecias* (Book of Prophecies), an anthology of prophetic texts that he compiled near the end of his life, Columbus relates to Ferdinand and Isabella how, long before he ever approached them, he had become convinced that the westward voyage was not merely possible but his own personal vocation:

During this time, I searched out and studied all kinds of texts: geographies, histories, chronologies, philosoph[ies], and other subjects. With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies, and He opened my will to desire to accomplish this project. This was the fire that burned within me when I came to visit your Highnesses.

Of course, the reading alone suggests we are dealing with an unusual kind of sailor, one who, like the humanists of his day, has engaged in sifting and comparing ancient and modern knowledge for new purposes. There is some irony, then, in the fact that he claims that God intended to produce a *milagro ebidentísimo* ("highly visible miracle") in this enterprise by using an uneducated man: "For the execution of the journey to the Indies, I was not aided by intelligence, by mathematics, or by maps. It was simply the fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied."

Columbus clearly employed considerable intelligence, mathematical skill, and geographical knowledge in planning his route. He also knew from much experience at sea that winds in the Atlantic nearer the equator would carry him west, those to be found more to the north would take him east, back to Europe. And he was alert to other environmental signs. Late in the first voyage he turned south to follow a flock of birds that he rightly assumed were headed towards land. Without this chance or providential fact, he probably would have come ashore somewhere between Virginia and Florida instead of the Caribbean, with doubtless immensely different effects on subsequent world history.

Despite all the knowledge, abstract and practical, that Columbus brought to bear on his task, the religious intuitions he describes may strike us as bordering on delusion, on a par with the equally unexpected mystical speculations of the mathematician Pascal, or Newton's commentaries on the prophecies in the Book of Daniel. But anyone familiar with how prophecies have functioned throughout history knows they often work themselves out in ways their authors never envisioned. In Columbus' case, we may wish to avoid judging too quickly the "hand that could be felt" and other evidence that at times he seems to have heard something like divine locutions. They may have been delusions, intuitions, or something else moving in the depths of human history.

Far from being a later and idealized reinterpretation of his own past, Columbus' remarks are confirmed by a curious source. Recent scholars have discovered notes in Columbus' own hand dated 1481, over a decade before his first voyage, in the back of a copy of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini's (the later Pius II) *Historia rerum ubique gestarum*. There Columbus compiles a shorter list of prophecies from various sources which, it now seems perfectly clear, guided his whole life project. . . .

Much of this real history has been obscured for a long time by persons who found it expedient to use Columbus as a symbolic figure. For most older Americans, he was presented as a heroic proto-American, combating the obscurantism of reactionary Spanish Catholics who thought he would sail off

the end of the flat earth. (As we have seen, neither Columbus nor his intellectual critics believed in such absurdities.) In that reading, he became a forerunner of American Protestantism, modern science, and capitalist enterprise. It is no great loss that we have discarded that historical illusion.

Columbus also did service as an ethnic hero for Catholics, mostly Irish and Italian, during the large waves of immigration at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. There was less harm here, because he was a true hero. Enthusiasm grew so heated that on the four hundredth anniversary of his voyage in 1892 efforts were made to have him canonized. But Leo XIII, fully aware of Columbus' irregular marital situation (for reasons of inheritance he never married the woman he lived with after his wife died), contented himself with praising his human virtues: "For the exploit is in itself the highest and grandest which any age has ever seen accomplished by man; and he who achieved it, for the greatness of mind and heart, can be compared to but few in the history of humanity."

In recent years, of course, Columbus' standing as hero has come under severe assault. He and the culture he represented have been castigated for initiating the modern cultural dominance of Europe and every subsequent world evil: colonialism, slavery, cultural imperialism, environmental damage, and religious bigotry. There is a kernel of truth in these charges, but obviously to equate a single individual or a complex entity like a culture with what are currently judged to be the negative dimensions of the emergence of an interconnected human world is to do great historical injustice to both individuals and ideas.

Europeans, for example, had an ambivalent stance towards the new peoples they encountered. On the one hand, there arose almost instantaneously the beginnings of the "noble savage" myth, which had a varied career in the hands of writers like Thomas More, Montaigne, and Rousseau. On the other hand, actual experience of the new cultures revealed peoples who displayed much savagery and sometimes little nobility.

Columbus himself adhered to one side or the other in this culture war at different times in his life. In one of his first communications with the Spanish monarchs after the discovery, he described the Tainos of the Caribbean in glowing terms:

I see and know that these people have no religion whatever, nor are they idolaters, but rather they are very meek and know no evil. They do not kill or capture others and are without weapons. They are so timid that a hundred of them flee from one of us, even if we are teasing. They are very trusting; they believe there is a God in Heaven, and they firmly believe that we come from Heaven. They learn very quickly any prayer we tell them to say, and they make the sign of the cross. Therefore Your Highnesses must resolve to make them Christians.

As the self-contradictions of this passage suggest, Columbus was under the spell of one current in European mythology that believed such "uncivi-

lized" peoples to be somehow closer to the conditions of the Garden of Eden than those enmeshed in the conflicts of "civilization."

In fact, the Tainos themselves were enmeshed in the tribal raiding, slavery, and cannibalism that existed in the Caribbean long before any European arrived (the word "cannibal" is a corruption of the native term for the fierce Caribs who eventually gave their name to the whole region). Columbus was for a while on surprisingly good terms with his Tainos, who in turn used the Spaniards to their advantage against their enemies. But the distance between the cultures was great, and, with the arrival of less-than-ideal explorers in subsequent voyages, the situation took a bad turn. Towards the end of his third voyage, Columbus wrote to complain about criticism of his governorship over both natives and Spaniards:

At home they judge me as a governor sent to Sicily or to a city or two under settled government and where the laws can be fully maintained, without fear of all being lost. . . . I ought to be judged as a captain who went from Spain to the Indies to conquer a people, warlike and numerous, and with customs and beliefs very different from ours.

Columbus had discovered that the Indians were real flesh-and-blood human beings, with the same mix of good and evil that everywhere constitutes the human condition.

Today, the usual way of characterizing the behavior of the Europeans at this early stage is to fault them for not having the kind of sensitivity to the Other that a modern anthropologist or ethnologist would bring to such situations. Overlooked in this condemnation is the fact that it was precisely out of these tumultuous conflicts that the West began to learn how to understand different cultures as objectively as possible in their own terms. Columbus himself astutely noted differences between the various subgroupings of Tainos as well as their distinctiveness from other tribes. And even when he was driven to harsh action—against both Indians and Spaniards—it was not out of mere desire for power. Bartolome de las Casas, the well-known defender of the Indians, notes the "sweetness and benignity" of the admiral's character and, even while condemning what actually occurred, remarks, "Truly I would not dare blame the admiral's intentions, for I knew him well and I know his intentions were good." Las Casas attributes Columbus' shortcomings not to malign intent but to ignorance concerning how to handle an unprecedented situation.

This raises the question of larger intentions and the world impact of fifteenth-century European culture. The atrocities committed by Spain, England, Holland, and other European powers as they spread out over the globe in ensuing centuries are clear enough. No one today defends them. Less known, however, are the currents within that culture that have led to the very universal principles by which, in retrospect, we criticize that behavior today. For instance, not only Las Casas, but a weighty array of other religious thinkers began trying to specify what European moral obligations were to the new peoples.

Las Casas, who was the bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, where relations between mostly native populations and the central government remain dicey

even today, bent over backwards to understand local practices. He once even described human sacrifices as reflecting an authentic piety and said that "even if cruel [they] were meticulous, delicate, and exquisite," a view that some of his critics have remarked exhibits a certain coldness towards the victims. Other missionaries learned native languages and recorded native beliefs. The information coming from the New World stimulated Francisco de la Vitoria, a Dominican theologian at the University of Salamanca in Spain, to develop principles of natural law that, in standard histories, are rightly given credit as the origin of modern international law. To read Vitoria on the Indies is to encounter an atmosphere closer to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights than to sinister Eurocentrism.

Las Casas and Vitoria influenced Pope Paul III to make a remarkable statement in his 1536 encyclical *Sublimis Deus*:

Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by the Christians are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ. . . . Should the contrary happen it shall be null and of no effect. . . . By virtue of our apostolic authority we declare . . . that the said Indians and other peoples should be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ by preaching the word of God and by the example of good and holy living.

The Spanish crown itself had moral qualms about the conquest. Besides passing various laws trying to eliminate atrocities, it took a step unmatched before or since by any expanding empire: it called a halt to the process while theologians examined the question. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Charles V ordered a theological commission to debate the issue at the monastery of Valladolid. Las Casas defended the Indians. Juan Gines de Sepulveda, the greatest authority on Aristotle at the time, argued that Indians were slaves by nature and thus rightly subject to Spanish conquest. Though the commission never arrived at a clear vote and the Spanish settlers were soon back to their old ways, Las Casas' views were clearly superior and eventually prevailed.

Conquest aside, the question of even peaceful evangelizing remains very much with us. Today, most people, even Christians, believe it somehow improper to evangelize. The injunction to preach the gospel to all nations, so dear to Columbus' heart, seems an embarrassment, not least because of the ways the command has been misused. But some of the earlier missionaries tried a kind of inculturation that recognized what was good in the native practices and tried to build a symbolic bridge between them and the Christian faith. The Franciscans in New Spain and the Jesuits in Canada, for example, tried this approach. Not a few of them found martyrdom.

Many contemporary believers do not think that there was much need to evangelize. This usually arises out of the assumption that native religions are valid in their own way. It will not do, however, given the anthropological evidence, to make facile assumptions that all spiritual practices are on an equal plane. The early explorers who encountered them did not think so, and neither should we. For example, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, no special

friend of Christianity or the Spanish conquest, in the very act of admiring the richness of Aztec culture, characterizes the Aztec gods as "a whole pantheon of fear." Fuentes deplores the way that missionaries often collaborated with unjust appropriation of native land, but on a theological level notes the epochal shift in native cultures thanks to Christian influence: "One can only imagine the astonishment of the hundreds and thousands of Indians who asked for baptism as they came to realize that they were being asked to adore a god who sacrificed himself for men instead of asking men to sacrifice themselves to gods, as the Aztec religion demanded."


This Copernican Revolution in religious thought has changed religious practice around the world since it was first proclaimed in Palestine two millennia ago, yet is all but invisible to modern critics of evangelization. Any of us, transported to the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan or to many other places around the world before the influence of Christianity and Europe, would react the way the conquistadors did—with rage and horror. We might not feel much different about some of the ways that Europeans, imitating Islamic practice, evangelized at times by the sword and perpetrated grave injustices around the world. But it is reductionist in the extreme to regard evangelization simply as imperialism. The usual uncritical way in which we are urged to respect the values of other cultures has only the merest grain of truth buried beneath what is otherwise religious indifferentism.

For all our sense of superiority to this now half-millennium-old story, we still face some of the same questions that emerged in the fifteenth century. We still have not found an adequate way to do justice to the claims of both universal principle and particular communities. We have what Vaclav Havel has called a "thin veneer of global civilization" mostly consisting of CNN, Coca Cola, blue jeans, rock music, and perhaps the beginning glimmer of something approaching a global agreement on how we should treat one another and the planet.

But that minimal unity conceals deeper conflicts involving not only resistance to superficiality but the survival of particular communities of meaning. We say, for example, that we have an equal respect for all cultures—until we come up against religious castes and sexism, clitorectomies and deliberate persecution. Then we believe that universal principles may take precedence. But whose universal principles? A Malaysian prime minister has lately instructed us that, contrary to international assumptions, "Western values are Western values: Asian values are universal values." It may take another five hundred years to decide whether that is so, or whether the opposition it assumes between East and West will persist.

All of this may seem a long way from the fifteenth century. But it is not mere historical fantasy to see in that beginning some of the global issues that are now inescapably on the agenda for the new millennium. Christianity and Islam, the two major proselytizing faiths in the world, are still seeking a *modus vivendi*. The global culture initiated by Columbus will always be inescapably European in origin and, probably, in basic shape. We chose long ago not to stay quietly at home and build the otherwise quite wonderful contraptions called cuckoo clocks. That decision brought (and brings) many challenges, but the very struggle should remind us of the glorious and ultimately providential destiny of the ongoing global journey that began in the fifteenth century.

NO



Gerald Vizenor

Christopher Columbus: Lost Havens in the Ruins of Representation

Christopher Columbus searched for a haven and landed in resistance literature and his own arcane signatures, neither solace in tribal memories nor esteem in the curia; nonetheless, his missions were uncovered several centuries later and commemorated as cultural entitlements in a constitutional democracy.

Columbus has been espied in a civilization that remembers him more than the names of the presidents. The nerve of his adventures has been celebrated more than the ecstasies of the shamans, and he has been honored over the tribal communities that were enslaved and terminated in his name.

Francis Parkman observed in *Pioneers of France in the New World* the claims that America "was found by Frenchmen." The word found, to come upon by accident, seems to be more accurate than discovered; that a nation was found is ironic, passive, and the simulation of lost continents. How could a new nation recover the found, or in a nautical note, "find one's bearings," four years before Christopher Columbus?

"This vast territory was claimed by Spain in right of the discoveries of Columbus, the grant of the Pope," and various other causes and conditions, wrote Parkman. "England claimed it in light of the discoveries of Cabot; while France could advance no better title than might be derived from the voyage of Verazzano and vague traditions of earlier visits by Breton adventures."

Parkman would sooner turn an ear to the ironies of historical ports of call, or lost and found discoveries, than consider the real miseries of the tribes under trinary colonial claims. "America, when it became known to Europeans, was, as it has long been, a scene of wide-spread revolution," he wrote in *The Jesuits In North America*. The "Indian, hopelessly unchanging in respect to individual and social development, was, as regarded tribal relations and local haunts, mutable as the wind."

Native American Indians have endured the historical ironies over lost and found discoveries, the rights of treasures, and continental encounters, for more than twenty generations. The tribes, however, are not the only cultures to resist the discoveries of Columbus. Michael Kammen, in *Mystic Cords of Memory*, wrote that a newspaper editorial at the turn of the last century

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argued nobody needs a holiday to think about the discovery of America, nobody but "our engaging friends of the Mafia would need all day in which to celebrate the feat of their compatriot."

Kammen wrote, "Amerigo Vespucci became a source of international debate" over the origin of the name America. There were many other theories of discoveries. "Christian abbots", for instance, "may have reached the shores of North America eight hundred years before Columbus," and the "myth of a Welsh prince named Madoc, a fabulous navigator, also enjoyed currency for a while."

Christopher Columbus has never been without historical dissonance over his missions, colonial strategies, the dubious search for a haven, and the rights of discoveries in his name. More books have been published about his discoveries than the number of sailors on his original voyage, and more books have been released in the past year than have been published in five centuries.

Cristobal Colon, Colombo, Colom, Colomb, or Christopher Columbus, has "given his name to more geographical places than any other actual figure in the history of the world, with the exception only of Queen Victoria; in the United States he surpasses all other eponyms except Washington," wrote Kirkpatrick Sale in *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*.

The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago celebrated his discoveries as an enviable beat in the heart of a new nation. Antonin Dvorak composed his symphony "From the New World." Frederick Jackson Turner presented his epoch thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," that summer to his colleagues at the American Historical Association, three years after the massacre at Wounded Knee.

At the same time the federal government issued a memorial coin on the quadricentennial with the image of Columbus on one side and "the Santa Maria on the reverse." A similar coin has been struck for the quincentenary, and to underscore five centuries of cultural amnesia a "certificate of authenticity" is issued with the purchase of each coin.

President Ronald Reagan announced that Christopher Columbus was a "dreamer, a man of vision and courage, a man filled with hope for the future." In other words, a denial of cruelties and colonialism. "Put it all together and you might say that Columbus was the inventor of the American Dream."

The American Dream has been a burden to most tribal communities in the past five centuries; dreams such as these were seldom more than consumer simulations. The tribes and even the dubious discoverers have been transvalued in the cultural revisions of a chemical civilization.

Robert Bellah, for instance, wrote in *The Broken Covenant* that Indians have become "a symbolic focus of the counterculture." He pointed out that the "transvaluation of roles that turns the despised and oppressed into symbols of salvation and rebirth is nothing new in the history of human culture, but when it occurs, it is an indication of new cultural directions, perhaps of a deep cultural revolution."

Columbus wrote at the very end of his first journal, "I hope to Our Lord that it will be the greatest honor for Christianity, although it has been accomplished

with such ease." He could be the crown conservative candidate, the new simulation in the constitutional democracy that has honored his names, and with such ease. The quincentenary candidate has earned five centuries of critical interpretations and historical revisions. . . .

Columbus has been invented in many faces and historical scenes over the past five hundred years; he has been created in numerous portraits, motivated in at least six new novels, captured for children in miniature dioramas, and featured in sundries, national advertisements, and several commercial motion pictures.

Gerard Depardieu, for instance, is the most recent emergence of the adventurer in the new wave romance "1492: Conquest of Paradise," directed by Ridley Scott. Columbus has never been worth more; not even the warrant of his title, at the time of his claim, would come close to the forty-five million dollars invested in the production of this quincentenary simulation.

"I was very happy to play Columbus, to give some idea of the man," said Depardieu in an interview in the San Francisco Chronicle. "Because who knows Columbus? Even historians know little about him. He was a Jew? We don't know. Spanish? Italian? Nothing is known about him."

Columbus has been featured in thousands of news stories and hundreds of books have been published in connection with the quincentenary; here are notes, brief reviews, and selected quotations from a selection of recent books about the life, times, adventures, and voyages of that most elusive historical figure, Christopher Columbus.

The Northeast Indian Quarterly published an outstanding collection of essays on the quincentenary from a Native American Indian perspective. "When surveyed on the multiple item question, 'In what way would you characterize the Quincentenary?' seventy percent of those responding described it either as '500 years of Native People's resistance to colonization', or as an 'anniversary of a holocaust.'

Twenty percent identified it as a 'commemoration of a cultural encounter,' and only six percent considered it a 'celebration of discovery.'" The special issue of the quarterly was edited by Jose Barreiro.

The Newberry Library published *A Guidebook of Resources for Teachers of The Columbian Encounter*, an illustrated and annotated collection of historical sources for use in public schools and universities. The editors point out that the "mass of literature produced" for the quincentenary "has no counterpart anywhere else in the world," and "one is struck on the whole by its breadth and sympathy for viewpoints other than the Euro-American."

Kirkpatrick Sale, in *The Conquest of Paradise* an outstanding and original examination of historical documents, overturns common assumptions about the environment and the adventures of Christopher Columbus. The vastness and "variety of nature in the Americas came to have an immense effect on Europe's environmental sensibilities in the centuries ahead," wrote Sale. America had eight times the space of Europe and "thousands of species of biota that Europe had never known before. But at this point more important was the ecological character and history of Europe and the lessons from that heritage that were brought to these new lands—the westward impact, so to

speak—because it wasn't so much that Europe discovered America as that it incorporated it and made it part of its own special, long-held and recently ratified, view of nature."

Sale concluded that there was salvation in the New World, though it was not of a kind the Europeans then understood. They thought first that exploitation was salvation, and they went at that with a vengeance, and found new foods and medicines and treasures, but that proved not to be; that colonization and settlement was salvation, and they peopled both continents with conquerors, and it was not that either; that progress and power and technics wrested from the new lands was salvation, and they made mighty nations and towering cities in its service, but it was not even that. . . . Theirs was indeed a conquest of Paradise, but as is inevitable with any war against the world of nature, those who win will have lost—once again lost, and this time perhaps forever. . . .

Columbus by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto is a concise historical portrait of the adventurer and his pursuit of patronage. The author is general editor of *The Times Atlas of World Exploration* and author of *Before Columbus*, *The Spanish Armada*, and *Barcelona*, all published in the past five years.

Fernandez-Armesto wrote, [that] Columbus had complained even in his own lifetime of being despoiled of the honour of his discovery and though he was referring to the stintedness of his acclaim rather than to the elevation of the claims of rivals, it is true that his reputation has since suffered repeatedly from attempts to attribute the discovery of the New World to someone else. . . . The ambition that drove him was fatal to personal happiness. Almost anyone, it might be thought, would rest content with so much fame, so much wealth, so many discoveries, so dramatic a social rise. But not Columbus. His sights were always fixed on unmade discoveries, unfinished initiatives, imperfect gains, and frustrated crusades. Instead of being satisfied with his achievements he was outraged by his wrongs. Unassuaged by acclaim, he was embittered by calumnies. This implacable character made him live strenuously and die miserably.

Marvelous Possession: The Wonder of the New World by Stephen Greenblatt considers the representations and simulations of tribal cultures, the wonders of the others, in travel narratives and "judicial documents." This is a marvelous textual interpretation of the "experience of the marvelous" that allowed the appropriation and colonial possession of land in the New World. Greenblatt studied the texts that would have inspired the wonders and concepts of Columbus about the unknown and India: "In the late fifteenth century that concept depended principally on Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville, whose books Columbus read and quite possibly carried with him on his first voyage." Columbus, however, abused real tribal people as savages, not as discovered texts. The marvelous possessions in texts have no historical referent; the wonders of travel narratives are the manifest manners of interpretations.

"Why did Columbus, who was carrying a passport and royal letters, think to take possession of anything, if he actually believed that he had reached the outlying regions of the Indies? It did not, after all, occur to Marco Polo in the late thirteenth century to claim for the Venetians any territorial rights in the East or to rename any of the countries; nor in the fourteenth century did Sir

John Mandeville unfurl a banner on behalf of a European monarch," wrote Greenblatt. "The difference may be traced of course to the fact that, unlike Marco Polo or Mandeville, Columbus was neither a merchant nor a pilgrim: he was on a state-sponsored mission from a nation caught up in the enterprise of the Reconquista. But the objective of this mission has been notoriously difficult to determine." Tribal cultures could not dispute colonial claims because they were "not in the same universe of discourse."

Mandeville, the "knight of non-possession, was a marvelous liar, a fantastic anatomist, but his stories were no more burdensome to tribal survival than colonialism, objectivism, and the literature of dominance. He mentioned the "Indians whose testicles hang down to the ground," and other textual envies. Greenblatt observed that "these marvels served as one of the principal signs of otherness and hence functioned not only as a source of fascination but of authentication."

Columbus: The Great Adventure by Paolo Emilio Taviani is an accessible biography, an unabashed commemoration of the adventurer by a distinguished scholar. He was born in Genoa and traced all the voyages of Columbus to the Americas. Columbus, the author noted, "certainly owned and read Sir John Mandeville's fantastical *Travel* and Julius Capitolinus's *De locis habitabilibus*; so said Andres Bernaldez, in whose house Columbus was a guest."

Columbus was fortunate to have encountered the scholar Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, who had studied at the University of Florence and later at Padua. Taviani wrote that the "fall of Constantinople to the Turk ruined many Venetian, Genoese, and Florentine families, particularly those involved in the spice trade. The Toscanelli family must have been preoccupied by these events and turned their gaze to the west to supplement the declining income from their commercial trade. There the land with the greatest promise was Portugal, not only because of its recent discoveries but also because it had before it an unknown and mysterious Ocean. If that mystery could be cleared up, science would be enriched. The world was growing smaller just when the need was being felt for wider space, new horizons."

Toscanelli, in a letter to Canon Fernando Martins of Lisbon, argued for the "shortest sea route from here to the Indies." That letter, dated 25 June 1474, was copied by Columbus five years later and is now in the Columbus Library, Seville. Toscanelli demonstrated with a globe that directly "opposite them to the west is shown the beginning of the Indies with the islands and places . . . bearing every kind of spice and gem and precious stone."

Taviani pointed out that "Columbus's intuition, brilliant even in its errors, did not stem from scientific deduction. It was the intuition of a sailor, a self-taught man who merely sought to buttress it scientifically. . . . But the limits of the geographic conception with which he sought to cloak his intuition and the grand design do not diminish the value and significance both would have in human history; they do not diminish his extraordinary genius."

In Search of Columbus by David Henige is a critical textual interpretation of the diario, the elusive manuscript document of the first voyage. The author concluded that the document is the "work of many hands,

written and rewritten with many purposes in mind, and transcribed far too frequently for comfort." The "diario" was discovered two hundred years ago, and many translations have been published since then.

The transcription of the "diario" by Bartolome de las Casas "stands outside any manuscript tradition, having no known predecessors and no other contemporaneous versions. Even so, we know from its own testimony that it had more than one textual ancestor and has had descendants in the form of various modern editions," wrote Henige.

The Log of Christopher Columbus by Robert Fuson, for instance, translates and "incorporates many parts of Las Casas's *Historia* and Ferdinand's *Historie* that he believes were directly based on parts of the original log omitted by Las Casas or other transcribers." Fuson eliminates "certain redundancies" from the "Diario" and restores the first person, "where Las Casas and Ferdinand switch to the third person." Henige observed that Fuson is credited as the translator, but "in reality he is almost as much its author as Las Casas or Columbus."

Columbus "kept a daily account of the voyage, the *Diario de a bordo*," or the Onboard Log. "Without doubt this was the most accurate and complete ship's log ever produced up to its time," wrote Fuson in *The Log of Christopher Columbus*. The original log was presented to Queen Isabella: "With very little delay, she commanded a scribe to prepare an exact copy for the Admiral." This "version of the Log is known as the Barcelona copy."

Fuson points out that the "holograph original has not been seen since the death of Queen Isabella in 1504, and it is only presumed to have been in her possession up until that time." The Barcelona copy, with charts, manuscripts, and personal papers, was inherited by his eldest son Diego, and then passed on to Luis, the grandson of Columbus. "The Barcelona copy of the *Diario de a bordo* was in Luis' possession in 1554, the year in which he was granted authorization to publish it. . . . He probably sold it to some member of the nobility who placed the manuscript in a private library, where it still lies hidden or whence it was destined eventually to disappear," but not before the manuscript "passed through the hands of Fray Bartolome de las Casas, a Dominican friar and close personal friend of the Columbus family." Las Casas was eighteen years old in Seville when he witnessed the "triumphant return" of Columbus "from the first voyage." Carlos Sanz published a "truly innovative transcription" thirty years ago that "included a facsimile of the original document."

The Diario of Christopher Columbus First Voyage to America 1492-1493, abstracted by Fray Bartolome de las Casas, transcribed and translated by Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelly, Jr., was published in the "American Exploration and Travel Series" by the University of Oklahoma Press. The transcription of this "diario" published with the translation, was derived "principally from the Sanz facsimile." The translators wrote that to "ensure accuracy, we prepared special computer programs that permitted a standard word processor to handle the many special characters in the manuscript." The "diario" begins, "This is the first voyage and the courses and way that the Admiral Don Christobal Colon took when he discovered the Indies, summarized except for the pro-

logue that he composed for the king and queen, which is given in full and begins this way. . . ."

Barnet Litvinoff, in *Fourteen Ninety-Two*, studied the historical, political, and religious conditions of the world at the end of medievalism, or the historical transitions at the time of Columbus: "The Inquisition laboured to eradicate Muslim survivalism, but without success. . . . Their miseries exceeded those of the Jews, even though the Inquisition laid a lighter hand upon them." The marrano "attracted envy, while the Morisco was exploited and despised," wrote Litvinoff in this erudite history. Spain surrendered itself to the chimera of racial purity. Perhaps it spent itself thereby. This country was the first in our modern age to demonstrate how religious despotism cannot serve as a formula for national greatness. While the splendour of its sixteenth-century preeminence, made possible by Christopher Columbus, radiated into the early seventeenth century, Spanish potency as a world power was already on the wane.

Litvinoff concluded that 1492 was without doubt the first universal benchmark since the birth of the Christian era. That year changed direction for all the world's people, articulate and otherwise, and engendered the creation of a new America, a different Asia, an Africa revealed. We observe the profound consequences for Europe itself. This continent is at last reassessing its own political and social structures with a view to eradicating the chronic weaknesses of the last 500 years.

Inventing the Flat Earth by Jeffrey Burton Russell is a concise study of the geographical knowledge in the world at the time of Columbus. The flat earth fables come after the voyage of the adventurer, and "it is falsely supposed that one purpose, and certainly one result, of Columbus's voyage was to prove to medieval, European skeptics that the earth was round. In reality there were no skeptics. All educated people throughout Europe knew the earth's spherical shape and its approximate circumference. This fact has been well established by historians for more than half a century."

Columbus consulted the philosopher and theologian Pierre D'Ailly, "who discussed the earth's volume, the poles, climatic zones," and he "questioned the roundness of the earth only in the modern sense" that the sphere has mountains and is irregular. John Mandeville wrote marvelous travel narratives; he lied, but "his lies took place on a round earth."

Russell pointed out that the truth of the Flat Error lies in its incoherence as well as in its violation of facts. First there is the flat-out Flat Error that never before Columbus did anyone know that the world was round. This dismisses the careful calculations of the Greek geographers along with their medieval successors; it makes Aristotle, the most eloquent of round-earthers, and Ptolemy, the most accurate, into flat-earthers. Moreover, Russell wrote, another "crude form of the Flat Error is the lurid embellishment that sailors feared that they would plunge off the edge of the flat earth if they voyaged too far out into the ocean." . . .

America Discovers Columbus by Claudia Bushman is a close focus on the portraiture and popular cultural representations of the explorer. She studies the national metaphors of adventure, discoveries, and commemorative celebrations over two centuries of iconography on Columbus.

Bushman noted that the "name Columbia was adopted as an alternative to America on the eve of the American Revolution." Phillis Wheatley, born a slave and later freed, was the first to use the name Columbia in her "poetic tribute to George Washington." She wrote, "One century scarce perform'd its destin'd round, When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found." Bushman wrote, "Columbia was the Utopian land, newborn and full of promise." Philip Freneau and a "whole generation of poets, known as the 'rising glory school,' saw Columbia as the future hope of the world."

The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago was a national broadside, a Utopian theater of conservative inscriptions and eternal discoveries; events were scheduled everywhere to commemorate the four centuries of Columbus. "The Indian students from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, marched in the school procession, where they were praised for smooth marching and regal carriage. A model Indian school thus demonstrated the 'civilization' of the natives," wrote Bushman. One repeated theme at that time was that "Columbus would never die but would live forever, honored and praised by each succeeding generation." The New World, however, "ignored him for the first two hundred years." The celebrations three centuries later were "decorous and dignified," and then, at last, the "business of the world halted to note his accomplishments" over the quadricentennial.

Kirkpatrick Sale pointed out that the "director of the American Republics, a division of the 1893 Columbian Exposition," wrote that the effigies of Christopher Columbus "had been 'painted and carved more often, perhaps than [that] of any other except the Savior of Mankind, and that the world is reminded of its obligation to him by more monuments than have been reared to the honor of any other hero of history.'"

Native American Indians have overturned and transvalued quincenary celebrations, and there have been serious demands for more sensitive histories of tribal cultures in public schools and universities. Columbus could "recede as an individual" in future celebrations, and "his voyage considered less of a personal achievement as we consider the larger forces of which he was a part," wrote Bushman. Columbus, she concluded, "serves as a mirror for Americans, always ready to accept our praises and our blame. What we think of Columbus reflects what we think of ourselves."



POSTSCRIPT



Did Columbia's Voyages Have a Positive Effect on World History?

Pouring through the many Columbus-oriented works which were products of the quincentennial anniversary is likely to leave one bewildered and perplexed. One wonders how many writers can take the same information and come to diametrically opposed conclusions concerning Columbus and his place in history. Of course, as is usual in historical matters, one's experiences and the perspective derived from them are important determinants in drawing conclusions from the historical process.

It is worth noting that when the Columbus "iconography" was established in the West, the perspective on civilization was a Eurocentric one, and many of its potentially-negative voices were muted or silent. As Western history became more "inclusionary" and a multi-cultural view of history made its way into the public consciousness, these voices began to be heard. They produced an alternative interpretation of Columbus's voyages and their impact on history far different from their predecessors. What the future will hold for the subject remains to be seen.

One important question germane to the Columbus debate is: To what extent can he be held personally responsible for the transatlantic slave trade, the annihilation of Native American populations, the ecological destruction of the Western Hemisphere, and other evils that were committed long after his death? Any assessment of Columbus's role in world history needs to explore answers to this question.

The post-quincentennial Columbus years have produced a large volume of works on the subject. Some of those on the negative side of the admiral's contributions to world history include Basil Davidson, *The Search for Africa: History, Culture, Politics* (Random House, 1994)—that contains a chapter entitled "The Curse of Columbus"—which blames him for the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. David Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992) goes so far as to hold Columbus responsible for the genocidal acts committed against Native American populations. Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (Penguin Books, 1991) takes a more philosophical approach, but still considers Columbus's legacy to be a negative one, especially as far as the environment is concerned.

Columbus has not been without support. The late Italian historian Paolo Emilio Taviani (1913–2001), in *Columbus: The Great Adventure: His Life, His Times, and His Voyages* (Orion Books, 1991) makes a passionate plea for history to view the positive side of the Columbus legacy. Several articles do the same, including: Robert Royal, "Columbus as a Dead White Male: the Ideological Underpinnings of the Controversy over 1492," *The World and I* (December, 1991); Dinesh D'Sousa, "The Crimes of Christopher Columbus," *First Things* (November, 1995); Michael Marshall, "Columbus and the Age of Exploration," *The World And I* (November, 1999).